International legal employment is extraordinarily diverse, ranging from jobs with multinational corporations to law firms to Peace Corps-related activities. Foreign legal experiences extend from living in Seoul and working for a South Korean law firm to living in Los Angeles and flying out to different branch offices throughout the world. Travel abroad is common.

Law students with unique foreign language skills and with experience living abroad may have an advantage in being hired. Most international legal work falls into the area of international business transactions and business litigation, which are often governed by U.S. or British law. Thus, an attorney’s best chance of doing international legal work is found at a U.S. or British law firm or company.

International legal employment often involves working with contrasting laws from two separate countries to accomplish the client’s objectives. It can be helpful if an attorney is familiar with the language and the customs of the countries involved.

Foreign legal opportunities fall into two general categories: private and public international law.

PRIVATE INTERNATIONAL LAW

Foreign Law Firms

Overseas law firms, with the exception of British law firms, usually limit their formal recruiting to a search for experienced attorneys. However, some firms offer internship positions and new associate positions to students that show exceptional language skills and express a genuine interest in living and working in their country. Foreign firms typically hire American attorneys who have specialized in corporate law or litigation.

Foreign firms tend to want many of the same characteristics that American firms seek: high grades, journal or moot court experience, a good legal background, and strong writing skills. However, foreign firms also look at other characteristics such as language fluency, intent to practice in the country, an understanding of the culture, and some understanding of that country’s laws.
Large British law firms offer U.S. law students the best opportunity to practice at a foreign law firm in an international setting. This is because, with the sole exception of U.S. law, British law governs the most international business transactions. Large British law firms may have offices worldwide and tend to be structured and pay their U.S. attorneys similarly to their U.S. law-firm counterparts. From the start of their careers, young associates at large British firms often have the opportunity to practice law in offices all over the world.

United States Law Firms

A large U.S. law firm is the most likely place for a law student to find international legal work. An increasing number of U.S. firms, especially the top 200 U.S. law firms, operate offices in other countries. Some of these firms have dozens of foreign offices. These firms occasionally have openings for interns or new associates in their overseas offices, but generally new associates have to work one to four years in the firm’s U.S. office and then transfer overseas. Attorneys at these firms frequently deal with litigation or transactions involving one or more U.S. citizens or corporations. Many large domestic firms work with foreign clients who do business in the United States (e.g., German, Brazilian, or Japanese clients coming to New York or Los Angeles to seek advice on international business transactions).

Multinational Corporations

General counsel for a multinational corporation, such as IBM or General Motors, will often travel internationally and may occasionally be assigned to live in a foreign country. These corporations tend to hire experienced attorneys but will periodically hire new associates and interns.

Preparing for a Private International Law Career

Developing a career track in private international law is not that different from developing a successful career track in private practice generally. This section discusses the common elements of developing your qualifications and expertise, and networking with an eye towards your goal of working on international deals.

Developing Your Qualifications

Similar to getting a job with a domestic corporate firm, the firms or companies you may be targeting will look for excellent academic credentials
such as good grades, participation on a journal or moot court activities, and evidence that you are working to develop and refine your legal writing skills. This can be demonstrated by choosing courses in which you write papers, publishing a comment, or doing an independent study with a professor. You may also consider taking some courses such as comparative law or any corporate course that spends at least some part of the semester studying cross-border issues.

In addition to the academic qualifications, you should begin developing your interest in the county or practice areas that you wish to work in. For example, if you are interested in working in the area of corporate law or finance domestically, you should likely read the Wall Street Journal regularly to keep abreast of business developments. If you are interested in a particular country or region, you should research and find out what lawyers and business people are reading there to stay current and get a subscription. Over time, this is how you can develop business understanding and cultural fluency necessary to practice in another country.

**Developing Your Expertise**

The practice areas that are most helpful for international firms are generally corporate (not litigation) areas of practice such as: intellectual property, international transactions, finance, energy, and banking. In some ways, it is helpful to think inside the box when considering the practice area that would be useful for an international client. For example, many employers will consider it more important that you have taken corporations, securities law, mergers & acquisitions, and perhaps a finance course at the Wharton school than to have taken a course with the title “international law.” In addition to focusing your studies in an applicable direction during law school, some attorneys interested in international practice also consider doing an LL.M abroad in EC (European Communities) law, or on a comparative law topic.

In addition to developing your expertise while in law school, many law firms will require that you develop some practical expertise in the U.S. before you are invited to work on cases involving international deals or to work in a foreign office. Your value in that foreign office is often having a solid grasp of corporate law practice in the U.S.
Laying the Groundwork

While you may not be able to expect to work directly as an attorney in a foreign market or have your first involvement in a deal be for one with multinational issues, it is often worthwhile to get some experience living and working in a foreign country. You may have already done so by studying or working abroad during college or graduate school. That is great experience to include on your resume.

Gaining employment at a law firm abroad or at a firm that does a significant amount of international work for your 2L summer takes significant planning and strategy. Typically, law students are hoping to gain an offer of permanent employment from their 2L summer employer. Much of the hiring has traditionally taken place in the late summer and early fall. Students apply for firms over the summer, screening interviews take place in late August/early September and callbacks follow shortly thereafter.

The process is fairly compressed, and to maximize your success, you should research firms over the summer and consult with your career counselor before you apply. The challenge is that many firms that do international work are very competitive when it comes to hiring and the international work is often coveted. Although firms with an international practice appreciate applicants with a demonstrated interest and background in international matters, they typically have a significant domestic practice as well. Therefore, you must be able to express your interest in international work while appearing flexible and willing to work on a variety of matters, depending on the firm’s needs.

Although only one or two students typically spend their entire 2L summer working for a law firm abroad, a growing number of students who work in a firm abroad split their summer between the foreign and domestic offices. If you’re interested, you should research those firms that have an international presence in the country you are interested in and then read about their summer program to see if they have sent students to a foreign office. The time to request splitting your summer with a foreign office of the law firm is after you do a callback and receive an offer from that firm’s domestic office.

Honing your language skills is another long term project that you should be working on. If you are already fluent in more than one language, you will want to work on learning the language and vocabulary well enough to
conduct business in that language. If you do not speak a foreign language already, you are not likely to get to a level of proficiency necessary for doing business in the few years of law school. You may consider practicing international law domestically, working in an English speaking country, or practicing European Community Law which is primarily conducted in English. If you are going to do that in a foreign country, you may want to begin learning the language such that you would be comfortable conversing at least casually with your clients in their language, even if your business transactions are conducted in English.

PUBLIC INTERNATIONAL LAW

Public international law is a broad category that encompasses a number of different types of practice areas in a number of different settings. Public international law is distinct from other areas of transnational practice in that at least one, and often both, of the parties to any transaction or litigation are sovereign states. Areas can include international trade law, immigration, international human rights, diplomacy and international criminal law, to name a few. Settings can include governmental, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, and international courts and tribunals. The subject area in which you may choose to practice may be related to the setting in which you practice, although many subject areas cross settings.

Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are nonprofit organizations created for a specific purpose, such as to advocate for AIDS funding in South Africa or to expose human rights abuses world-wide. Nongovernmental organizations can exist both domestically and abroad and range from small volunteer organizations to large, multi-country entities. There are thousands of NGOs operating in nearly every country in the world. Some NGOs are direct service organizations, while others concentrate on policy issues or reporting of human rights abuses or country conditions. Many of the organizations are not strictly legal—although they may have an advocacy component, their purpose may be humanitarian relief, health care or economic development. However, even these organizations can provide law students with valuable experiences.
Opportunities for full-time entry-level legal employment with NGOs are extremely limited and tend to be extraordinarily competitive. The most likely opportunities are fellowships with the large domestic and international programs. When thinking about NGOs, you will eventually need to narrow your focus by geography and/or area of interest. NGOs are often most receptive to candidates who can express a credible and demonstrable interest in the type of work that that NGO is involved with and/or the area of the world that the NGO operates in.

The United Nations and its Entities

The United Nations formally consists of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat. The United Nations also has a system of organizations that includes the High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Bank, and the International Labour Organization among others. It is important to be persistent when looking for summer and permanent positions with the United Nations. Finding information about the different programs and the different entities that hire people with a legal background can be challenging. It is important to note that there is a quota of how many U.S. citizens the United Nations can hire in a particular year, so programs for attorneys and others with relevant experience can be very competitive.

The United Nations and its entities do have openings for experienced attorneys and some internship programs. Additionally, many of the United Nations’ Missions around the world hire people with relevant experience. Finally, several of the United Nations’ organizations, like the UNHRC, have Junior Professional Officer and other specialized hiring programs. Although there is often a formal application process, the role of networking cannot be underestimated in securing a job at the United Nations. See the article at the following link for additional information on applying to the United Nations: (www.pslawnet.wordpress.com/2010/05/27/how-to-work-for-the-united-nations-or-other-inter-governmental-organizations).

International Tribunals and Foreign Courts

The United Nations is home to several international courts and tribunals that have been set up for specialized purposes. These include the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the
International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (housed in Tanzania), among others.

There are also other tribunals not associated with the United Nations. These include bodies such as the International Criminal Court, the Central American Court of Justice, the European Court of Human Rights, the European Court of Justice, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and others. Additionally, most countries around the world have appellate and other high courts.

International Criminal Tribunals often have internship opportunities appropriate for law students. Additional opportunities may be available in the other courts and tribunals associated with the United Nations. Some of the courts not associated with the United Nations also offer internship possibilities. For example, both the European and Inter-American Courts of Human Rights have internship programs. Finally, students have been able to secure summer internships with foreign courts such as the Supreme Court of Israel.

**United States Government Opportunities**

The United States government is involved in a great deal of international law work through a variety of its departments and agencies. This work may involve development and humanitarian work done by organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) or foreign affairs and diplomacy work as done by the Department of State's Office of Legal Advisor. Other governmental departments that may be involved in international work include the Department of Justice, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, the Department of Labor, the Treasury Department, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, among others.

The Department of State has civil service programs for experienced attorneys, the Diplomacy Fellows Programs and foreign services programs for attorneys or others with relevant experience. Additionally, USAID hires lawyers through its New Entry Professionals Program and International Development Intern Program, as well as through its fellowships. USAID also hires attorneys and others with relevant experience through a variety of programs. Extremely interesting, but also highly competitive positions.
in public international law are available through the Office of the Legal Advisor of the Department of State.

The Department of Justice hires new lawyers through its Attorney General’s Honors Program and experienced attorneys through lateral recruitment. Many of the other U.S. government agencies that practice some international law, like the Treasury Department and the Department of Labor, have honors and other entry level programs or hire through the Presidential Management Fellowship program. The Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF) Program is the federal government’s entry level program for graduate students and a great way to get into otherwise inaccessible government positions. Additionally, all agencies hire experienced attorneys through regular job openings.

**Intergovernmental Organizations and Foreign Governments**

Intergovernmental agencies are multi-lateral organizations made up of member countries. They may or may not have formal relationships with the United Nations. Intergovernmental organizations may be either international or regional in their scope. Organizations in this category include the Organization of American States, the World Trade Organization and the African Union. Additionally, some foreign governments may hire U.S. attorneys, especially those candidates that are citizens of the country. Foreign courts, especially Israel, have hired U.S. law students as law interns and law clerks.

Opportunities with intergovernmental organizations are as varied as the organizations themselves; some may require citizenship in one of the member countries. The Organization of American States has opportunities in the Department of International Law and a graduate student intern program. Likewise the World Trade Organization and the International Organization for Migration have internships for graduate students, as well as other possible opportunities for experienced lawyers and other professionals.

Opportunities in foreign governments can be difficult to find, but may readily exist in the territories and possessions of the United States. For example, opportunities for experienced attorneys exist in offices such as the Public Defender of American Samoa and the Attorney General of the Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands. Additionally, entry legal
government jobs—including judicial clerkships—are regularly available in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories and possessions.

**Preparing for a Public International Law Career**

Jobs and internships in public international law are among the most competitive jobs to get. It takes hard work, perseverance, the ability to search out the elusive opportunities that may be out there and the ability to make connections with people working in the field. Below are some of the things you can do to position yourself for a career in public international law.

It is important to note that you may not get there in one step. If you intend to pursue a career path in public international law you may have to do it in several steps in order to get the needed experience and connections. Starting as soon as you can in law school will help you in this process.

Lawyers seeking to do public international law typically first worked domestically in many different areas, developing skills and expertise that can later be translated into the international arena. Starting at a domestic organization that works on issues of human rights, work with immigrants, refugees and detainees, or economic development can be the first step in getting to an international career. An international criminal tribunals office values experienced prosecutors and defense attorneys.

If you find yourself at a law firm for a year or two, try to pick one with an international focus and one that supports pro bono work. You will need to be strategic in garnering assignments for paying clients related to the international practice areas. In addition, seek out pro bono work to get experience in subject areas relevant to the international arena such as refugee and asylum work and death penalty work. The challenge is that many firms that do international work are very competitive when it comes to hiring and the international work is often coveted. Although firms with an international practice appreciate applicants with a demonstrated interest and background in international matters, they typically have a significant domestic practice as well. Therefore, you must be able to express your interest in international work, while appearing flexible and willing to work on a variety of matters, depending on the firm’s needs.
Advantages of International Law Jobs

For some attorneys, a job in the international legal field gives them an opportunity to simultaneously do two things that they enjoy—practicing law and seeing the world. Many international attorneys work in countries where they made connections before law school through military service, church service, or Peace Corps service. By working internationally, these attorneys are able to return to a country in which they enjoyed living, keep their foreign language skills current, and use their legal skills to deal with interesting and unique issues.

Disadvantages of International Law Jobs

The primary disadvantage of international legal work is that some attorneys who practice it must live outside of the United States or travel a great deal of the time. Some foreign countries have unstable political systems, inadequate health care facilities, or poor educational programs. Even in those countries with high standards of living, an international lifestyle can be difficult for a family member unfamiliar with the language or culture of the foreign country. Most U.S. attorneys practicing law on an international scale, however, are able to live in the United States.

Another disadvantage is that skills developed in the international legal arena may not be easily transferable if an attorney decides to return to the United States. Although globalization reduces this concern, it does not entirely eliminate the problem. For instance, while an attorney working in Japan might quickly find work at a law firm in the United States, an attorney working in Turkey may have skills and specialized knowledge that appeals to only a small number of U.S. firms.

Getting an International Legal Job

Networking is important when trying to find any job, but it is essential when looking for an international job, especially for an international corporate position. Students interested in international work should contact anyone they know in the foreign country of interest and ask for names of attorneys and law firms in that country. Students should also contact attorneys practicing international law in the United States. Students may also contact Law Society members practicing internationally through

BYU Law School Career Services
the Advising Network, or through the Alumni Directory, which are both accessible at: www.law2.byu.edu (click on: Current Students > Careers > Networking).

These attorneys can often give an interested student a list of foreign attorneys and law firms. These references and names are often critical in finding a job within the international legal community. In the world of international law, the cliché, “It’s not what you know, but who you know,” often holds true.

A few foreign law firms will pay for airfare and lodging when they are interviewing U.S. attorneys, but generally these arrangements will be the responsibility of the applicant. Additionally, while some firms will arrange for visas and currency exchange, these arrangements are also typically left to the applicant.

For More Information

BYU CSO Networking Databases:


Advising Network: Students have access to a database of over 2,500 legal professionals who have volunteered to be a resource to law students. Professionals are listed by practice area as well as geographic location.

Alumni Directory: Students have access to a database of over 4,500 fellow BYU Law School Alumni who practice in nearly every field of law.


Comprehensive guide to everything you need to know about international public interest law, including how to get started, what opportunities exist, and words of advice from attorney’s currently practicing in the field.


Provides links to international organizations seeking interns.
Researching Careers in International Law: Resources in Print and Electronic Format – www2.lib.uchicago.edu/~llou/careers.html

American Association of International Law – www.asil.org

*Site dedicated to advancing the study of international law. Includes online and print resources for students and others interested in international law.*

PSLawNet – www.pslawnet.org

*Database of public sector jobs, internships, fellowships and pro bono opportunities, including international opportunities. Access to this service is free, but requires registration with the site.*


*Non-governmental organizations database of information and resources.*


*Includes information on student programs, fellowships and the New Entry Professionals program.*